The burden of Structural Racism

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संरचनात्मक जातिवादको बोझ

सन्दर्भ अन्तर्राष्ट्रिय भेदभावविरुद्धको दिवस

मध्यकालीन युगको जर्जर सामाजिक विभेदबाट कोल्टे फेर्दै मानव सम्मानको मूल्य र मान्यता स्थापित भइसकेको २१औँ शताब्दीमा हामी आइपुग्दा पनि जातीय भेदभावको प्रणाली अझै अस्तित्वमारहेको वास्तविकताका कारण समाजमा गहिरोरूपमा गाँजिएर जातिवादको संरचनात्मक रूपले निकै गहिरो जरा गाडेकाले नै हो।

Remembering the racially charged massacre carried out by the white apartheid government's police on the black community in Sharpeville Township, South Africa, on March 21, 1960, is still relevant today. While celebrating the International Day for elimination of all forms of racial discrimination, it is now more important than ever to understand the pervasive racial divisions in modern society through the structural nature of racism.

The current anthropological, and ancient archaeological and genomic evidence have indicated that the disparities between human groups originated during the transition from ancient pastoralism to agriculture, where the unequal distribution of agricultural surplus ensued by the vested interests of the dominant groups. This phenomenon subsequently spread globally. Despite arriving in the 21st century, when the values and recognition of human dignity and human rights have been established from the world view that sternly challenge the medieval notion of social divisions, the system of racial discrimination still exists in society due to the deep-rooted nature of structural racism.

Thus, caste systems have developed over time in various regions around the world, such as the varna-based caste system prevalent in South Asia, racial discrimination against African-Americans and indigenous peoples in the United States, settlers' colonial racism against indigenous peoples in Canada, inter-tribal divisions among the races in West Africa, the infamous apartheid racial segregation in South Africa, the casta system in Latin America, and other forms of hereditary social hierarchies that are still active in Eastern Asia.

Regardless of whether they are based on color-coded racism or any other form of descent-based discrimination, social stratification systems share three common elements: dehumanization, inequality, and stigmatization, where a powerful group seeks to maintain its dominance by exerting special rights, privileges and power over a marginalized groups, depriving the latter of all resources and facilities solely for the purpose of their exploitation.

During the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the United States, the people of color including African-Americans, Latinx, indigenous, and Asian individuals were disproportionately affected and impacted by the pandemic as the more likely to be infected and dying due to the disease. The main reason behind this was the existing structural racial disparities, whereby these affected individuals had a higher likelihood of contracting COVID-19 due to their dense presence in the proximity to frontline service sector jobs. Amidst this, the global movement against racism sparked by the killing of George Floyd in the United States brought widespread attention to the concept that caste is the fundamental root of all racial divisions, as proposed by the book "Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents" by the New York Times Best Seller Author Isabel Wilkerson.

Previously, it was loosely taken for granted that within the realm of global thought that the concept of caste as seen in America's racism, was independent of the varn-based caste system of the Indian subcontinent. Now, all the scientific evidence leaves no ground to doubt that casteism based on the hierarchical and structural discrimination as global caste serves as a common root cause for descent based social, economic, and cultural disparities. Understanding this shared basis of social stratification rooted in caste-based discrimination is essential for addressing concerns relevant to global humanity. In order for the complete eradication of discrimination based on caste that still remains a humongous task, integrating the evidence of the global extent of discrimination based on caste into the understanding of the historically created global social structure is crucial and is achievable by unifying global knowledge and literature on caste.

The common origin and the tale of Aryan supremacy, along with the deep-rooted Western racist caste discrimination and South Asian varna-based caste discrimination, had been flourishing in the global colonial era since the 17th century. While the negative impact of structural racism from the historical legacy profoundly affecting Black people and Indigenous Americans in American society is well-documented, Nepal's first anthropologist, Dor Bahadur Bista, established that the inhumane caste discrimination persisted in the country as an imported phenomenon from the 18th century onward.

Structural racism in America and structural caste discrimination in South Asia impose the burden of inequality on every aspect of the lives of the oppressed. While economists and social scientists have provided interpretations of this burden in terms of class, analyzing it through statistical analysis reveals that entrenched societal inequalities are perpetuated through both the primary factor of caste division and various intermediary factors such as education, income, housing, employment, health, social harmony, and more. Especially considering the widespread caste-based discrimination spanning centuries, the burden of intergenerational trauma persists among affected communities, leading to long-term mental stress. This chronic stress can manifest physically, leading to conditions like diabetes, hypertension, mental disorders, due to allostatic load, which is the neuronal and hormonal imbalance resulting from prolonged exposure to stressors. In the flip side, the continuation of the evil practice of socially constructed caste discrimination even in the 21st century has become a burden on whole human society.

Especially in the context of Nepal, the country has reached a significant historical turning point in the 21st century. Progressing from the rigidly hierarchical caste system entrenched in religious tradition and the first codified Muluki Ain (Civil Code) of 1854, which institutionalized caste-based discrimination, but transitioning now to the present

where all forms of discrimination are progressively being prohibited by the democratically oriented constitution. This signifies a transformational shift towards a future aligned with global standards. However, the implementation of newly enacted laws aimed at building a society based on human values and dignity faces challenges, leading to the need for focused efforts in their execution and enforcement. Addressing these entrenched inequalities requires comprehensive state policies for reparation at the societal level. It is crucial to ensure appropriate representation of marginalized caste groups for the relevant bodies responsible for implementation and development of such reparative statutes and laws and policies.

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